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101-00636/

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS ON EDUCATION

Round Table Discussion on Education

Introduction:

In collaboration with the Mexico and Inter-American Division (LMR) of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development organized a one-day discussion on September 25, 1997, on education in the Americas. Participants included the Council of Ministers of Education, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, The Association of Universities and Colleges, the Canadian Bureau of International Education and Centrale de l'Enseignement du Québec. As education will be one of four themes discussed at the second Summit of the Americas in April, 1998, (Santiago, Chile), participants were invited to provide their comments on a draft Education Action Plan. The following is a summary of the main issues discussed by participants.

Basic Themes:

Education is facing the double challenge of adequately preparing individuals to compete in the global knowledge-based economy while becoming increasingly mindful of local cultural identities and realities. In this context, education must seek a balance between pure utilitarianism and humanistic values. Education programs that focus solely on what people need to have in order to compete internationally can undermine local cultural identities and local life. Education and training programs should not only exist to equip individuals to become workers in the factories of first world companies. To ignore this principle of cultural identities and realities would constitute a disservice to those education is supposed to benefit in the first place, and in the long run, to countries advocating such an approach.

The Action Plan must clearly distinguish means from ends. Distance education, the application of new technologies, and student and educator exchanges are all tools that can be used to strengthen educational institutions (or to achieve other objectives) and they can thus improve the quality of education. They can be considered an objective in their own right when, for example, they serve to support the greater goal - to bring knowledge to people. The draft Action Plan should outline common objectives and list the means that countries could use to attain those objectives (some means could presumably be used to attain many objectives).

Canada believes that all societies can benefit from increased international cooperation in education. Not only can a society provide assistance and sometimes solutions to others but it can also, in return, enrich itself through the internationalization of its own education systems. As Education is an area of provincial jurisdiction, any further development of a Canadian policy on education in the Americas should be undertaken in consultation with the provinces.

Quality:

In order to strengthen the quality of education, the mobility of knowledge is as important, if not more important, than merely the mobility of people. Moving people can be very expensive and certain groups of people, such as women are often restricted in their ability to move.
While basic education is important, secondary and post-secondary education is equally vital if the countries of the hemisphere are to compete in and reap the benefits of their participation in the international marketplace.
Therefore, any action plan should call for enhanced development across the whole gamut of education levels.

The Action Plan should promote the decentralization and relevancy of education as ways to improve the quality of education. However, such an approach does not mean that countries should be freed of their responsibilities to establish, in cooperation with locally-based education systems, common education standards. In doing so, however, we must recognize that "common standards" do not equate to "uniformity". In the case of technical skills and professions, the Action Plan should encourage a closer collaboration with industry in order to better equip people for the evolving world in which they live and work.

Relevancy:

The Action Plan should ensure that education is rooted in its local cultural context. This principle is especially important for indigenous groups and minorities for which education was frequently used by colonial powers as a tool of assimilation.

Education systems should incorporate traditional knowledge and be more respectful of local conditions. These systems should make it easier for groups to conduct their own research into what they believe is relevant to their education. Some knowledge is grounded in a particular culture and education systems should, in order to respond to new realities, incorporate all points of view which can be useful.

Education, to be truly relevant, should acknowledge the links between formal and informal education, incorporate democracy and respect for human rights into its process, promote sustainable development and seek to alleviate poverty.

As there is value in learning that does not necessarily lead to degrees, Canada should try to ensure that there is some mention of informal mechanisms for education in the final Action Plan. This should include mechanisms that lead to the reinsertion of individuals into productive society. There is a need to ensure that people are prepared for the evolving nature of their work environments.

Equity:

Education systems must seek equality of access as well as equality of benefits. Benefits do not accrue from an educational system that destroys a culture. References to globalization or hemispheric integration should not simply refer to the universality of Spanish or English. People from all cultural groups of society should be able to use their knowledge, function in their own language and be given the opportunity to share their cultural experiences with others for the benefit of all.

In the Americas, access to primary education is an issue of vital importance to most countries.

Addressing the issues posed by the relevancy of education will in turn address issues related to equity of access to education among marginalized groups and equity of benefits accrued from education.

Canadian Aspects:

Canada has valuable experience to offer in terms of distance education, both through traditional means or through new educational technologies.

One of the greatest and most immediate contributions of the new communication technologies is that they can be

used to link educators to each other across the hemisphere. As such, they can also be used to link networks of educators and to build regional cooperation between education systems. Canada, through initiatives such as Schoolnet, has successfully been able to increased collaboration among educators from its 12 different systems of education, for the greater benefit of students.

Canada believes that new technologies are a means to more-accessible, more-efficient education, but also recognizes that they are not an end in themselves.

By ratifying international agreements that promote good practices in a wide number of areas of human activity, and by incorporating these practices into how we function, Canada has developed a culture that favours high quality education systems. By confronting racism, the plight of indigenous people, the status of women in society and others, Canada examines the relations of power in its society. This results in the development of education systems that are more relevant to local cultures, that promote equity in the benefits of education, and that equip people for the world in which they live.

Specific Proposals:

There is a need for focus and synthesis in the document to decrease the number of action points from 28.

Development through education will be achieved if educators are properly trained and given the autonomy to fulfil the objectives of the action plan

The Action Plan should:

underline the role of the state in supporting systems of education including the provision of adequate financing, the formulation of curricula, and the infrastructure necessary for an education system.

be accompanied with a lexicon included as an annex to ensure that everyone is working with a common definition and understanding of the issues to be addressed. Furthermore, the document touches upon many principles, goals and actions that already enjoy support in other fora such as UNESCO, the ILO, the UN General Assembly, the OAS and the OECD. Leaders should take into consideration existing agreements and commitments of their governments in the final drafting of the Action Plan.

*have a more logical progression from accepted principles, to common goals, to specific objectives, and then to means.

*address the relationship between education and the living and health conditions of both pre-school children and their parents, as pre-school years have such a profound impact on a child's later development advocate mechanisms to encourage and facilitate life-long learning.

*make reference to the need for the hemispheric countries to start looking into the legal implications of "knowledge mobility" especially with regard to issues such as intellectual property and copyrights.

Any reference to "national" standards in the Action Plan should be dropped in favour of "harmonized" or "common" standards. The development of national standards implies centralization when the document should focus on decentralization to ensure the relevancy of education to local situations. However, cooperation between

education systems to promote harmonization and common standards should be encouraged.

Canada should explore with the provinces the possibility of promoting the concept of a hemispheric conference on education prior to 2005 to prepare educational systems for the introduction of the Free Trade Area of the Americas. In the context of greater academic cooperation within the Americas, Canada should invite its hemispheric partners to look into the "College des Amériques" proposal, spearheaded by L'organisation universitaire inter-américaine (OUI).